

Rachel Switlick
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Primary Advisor: Meghan Durham-Wall
Secondary Advisor: Carolyn Cox

Words Interlacing Works

An Investigation of Collaborative Interdisciplinary Endeavors

Overview

Over the course of my undergraduate experience at The Ohio State University, I have become increasingly interested in investigating the depth of human expression and relation found within art forms. My dual studies in English and Dance as well as my extracurricular activities have exposed me to many contrasting viewpoints and approaches to artistic endeavors. It is my belief that the wide range of ways we express ourselves in various cultures and disciplines are more interrelated than may be apparent at first glance. However, it has been my experience that often the segregating terminologies (i.e. professional jargon) that align with specific forms prevent open dialogue across disciplines. To deconstruct these language barriers, I spent a great deal of time during my third year of undergraduate studies and summer travels to develop and refine a broad set of shared terminology applicable when looking at the integral compositional elements embedded artistic endeavors regardless of their classifying discipline. This involved researching literature on various artistic disciplines (e.g. theatre, dance, music, visual art, etc.), reading other writings that speak of art holistically, conversing with artists, and logging personal artistic experiences here and abroad.

In her book, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, Ellen Dissanayake states: "...the search for a common denominator, some quality or feature that characterizes all instances of art, that makes something "Art," gradually became both outmoded and a lost cause" (41). I agree that evaluation of art and what is essential to something being "art" remains

elusive and subjective. My research does not seek to classify or appraise things in terms of being or not being “art,” but rather to analyze the facets of artistic work. The terminology I have constructed focuses on how and why a work is made, what form it takes, and what holds it together as a cohesive entity: in other words, the composition of a work.

I outlined four overarching compositional elements of Purpose, Theme, Method, and Structure, each divided into several pertinent subcategories. This compositional terminology was designed to be implemented with only very simplistic explanation; however, in order to justify these newly formed constructs, I have detailed their development within the context of my research in other writings. For the limited scope of this paper, I will go on to explain the compositional terminology only as it pertains to my distinction work.

With this research being such a large part of my undergraduate studies, it seemed only fitting that my distinction project somehow utilize the tested and refined terminology. I experimented with collaboration with other artists: musicians, thespians, painters, writers, designers, videographers, dancers and another choreographer. I brought together these artists and performers from various disciplines to create a series of collaborative projects that would be *Polyphony*. My goal was to determine the practicality of my terminology in such interdisciplinary performance settings. I discovered that my four overarching categories — Purpose, Method, Theme, and Structure — were well understood by all collaborators. That affirmation aside, I was astounded by the usefulness of the conversation that the introduction to the terminology provided.

Through providing structure to the beginning discussions about the work we would make together, contributing artists were able to know their role, propose ideas, and ask questions without trepidation. I hope that my research into collaborative processes and supporting

vocabulary will help to alleviate the strained miscommunication that can inhibit interdisciplinary artistic connection. This research will fuel my own future endeavors and hopefully help to establish a new approach to collaborative process.

Research Method

My preparation for this distinction project began with the research to create my terminology. I studied existing terminologies of various art disciplines and read texts focused on compositional jargon. While art disciplines differ greatly in their delivery, practice, execution, appeal, history, and application, they all share commonalities in the compositional aspects that need to be considered. By honing in on similar concepts and reoccurring concerns in what I read, I determined that no matter what discipline or disciplines one chose to work with the following were constant considerations:

- Purpose** - a reason for the work to be made, the “why” that initiates the venture
- Method** - the creative process, “how” the work will be made
- Theme** - Binding aspects of the work, stylistic choices that persist in the work
- Structure** - the form the work takes, “what” the end product is

Through conversations with artists and art enthusiasts, I began to develop and refine subcategories for each of these four principal categories. I would discuss different wordings, trying to find the most appropriate and accessible vocabulary. Finding that cultural references often appear in thematic choices, I realized that I needed to expand my experience to cultural contexts outside of my own. I traveled to the Republic of Ireland with The OSU Department of English Literacy Locations Program and to the Czech Republic, where I represented The OSU Department of Dance at the 2012 New Prague Dance Festival with Cheyenne Abel. I continued to seek out opportunities to dialogue with various artists, forcing myself to bring up issues of cultural significance within contemporary work in order to gain perspective on how to discuss

what can often be a sensitive subject. This involved talking with public artists that I had just met and asking them about their contemporary work and its relationship to the traditions of their culture. For instance, I stopped to listen to a guitarist playing on Grafton Street in Dublin, Ireland. He informed me that the piece he was playing was by a Brazilian composer after I had wrongfully took it for Spanish guitar. We began talking, and although it was awkward and difficult, I asked him about the traditional music of Ireland and if he thought it pertained to the music being made there currently. I found that the way I phrased my inquiry had a great effect on the response. After some time, we established an open conversation on the subject. I repeated this practice with both contemporary and traditional artists. The initial stumbles were alleviated by treating the discourse with the respect it deserved. That respect helped to keep the conversation going and lead me to the more successful ways of navigating dialogue on cultural matters.

After I had worked to form a cohesive, understandable vocabulary, I constructed a pamphlet of questions sorted by these categories for collaborators to address when entering into a project together (see Figure 1a and Figure 1b).

Once I had a working version of the terminology ready, it was time to plan how I would go about putting it to use. I thought up the framework for a set of collaborative projects that would be my senior distinction performance. While this met some changes early on, a set for the show was eventually determined: a quartet dance choreographed by myself to original music composed by Evan Chapman, performed by a percussion quintet, that incorporated interaction with visual art pieces designed and fabricated by Charlie Manion and Kristen Coburn; a duet dance to a recorded composition composed by Trevor Cormack for mandolin, guitar, and bass, produced by Nick Kotz; a series of three monologues written by Leela Singh performed by actors who shared the stage with dancers performing solos I choreographed portraying the same

characters; a duet co-choreographed and performed by myself and Cheyenne Abel to a musical score designed by Thomas Bishop of recordings of Evan Chapman's music; and a solo choreographed by Cheyenne Abel to original music composed by Evan Chapman, performed by a percussion quintet. In addition to the five individual performance collaborative projects, there were collaborative efforts that went into creating a cohesive event: Kelly McNicholas painted a design on the stage floor; Emily Jeu made original costume designs; Thomas Bishop did the lighting design for each piece; Angela Cutrell, Lou Suer, Daniel Diller, and Asha Whitfield helped to organize and execute producing the event. As video documentation was in my original proposal, I thought to incorporate the art of filmmaking by contacting Boysenberry Image Factory: Michael Austin Polk, Seth Radley, Alexa G. Sison, and Taylor Stokes filmed the performance and interviewed contributors to create record of the results of the collaborations.

Each collaboration began with an initial conversation. I had my terminology pamphlet on hand, briefly explained my aim with the research, and then started talking about the project itself. I used the four categories to frame the discussion, stating anything I had in mind for the work and allowing the collaborator(s) to put forth their thoughts, desires, and ideas. Using the organizational structure of my terminology allowed for us to cover the important aspects of the project and establish a working dynamic.

I secured a performance venue at Mount Hall Studio Theatre and informed all involved of the performance dates and production schedule. After several months of rehearsals and studio time, we moved into the theatre, had several rehearsal runs, and then had the culminating performance. At the conclusion of the process, I sent a basic survey to my collaborators and performers, asking them to define the four categories. I collected the results and presented at the Denman Undergraduate Research Forum.

Figure 1a

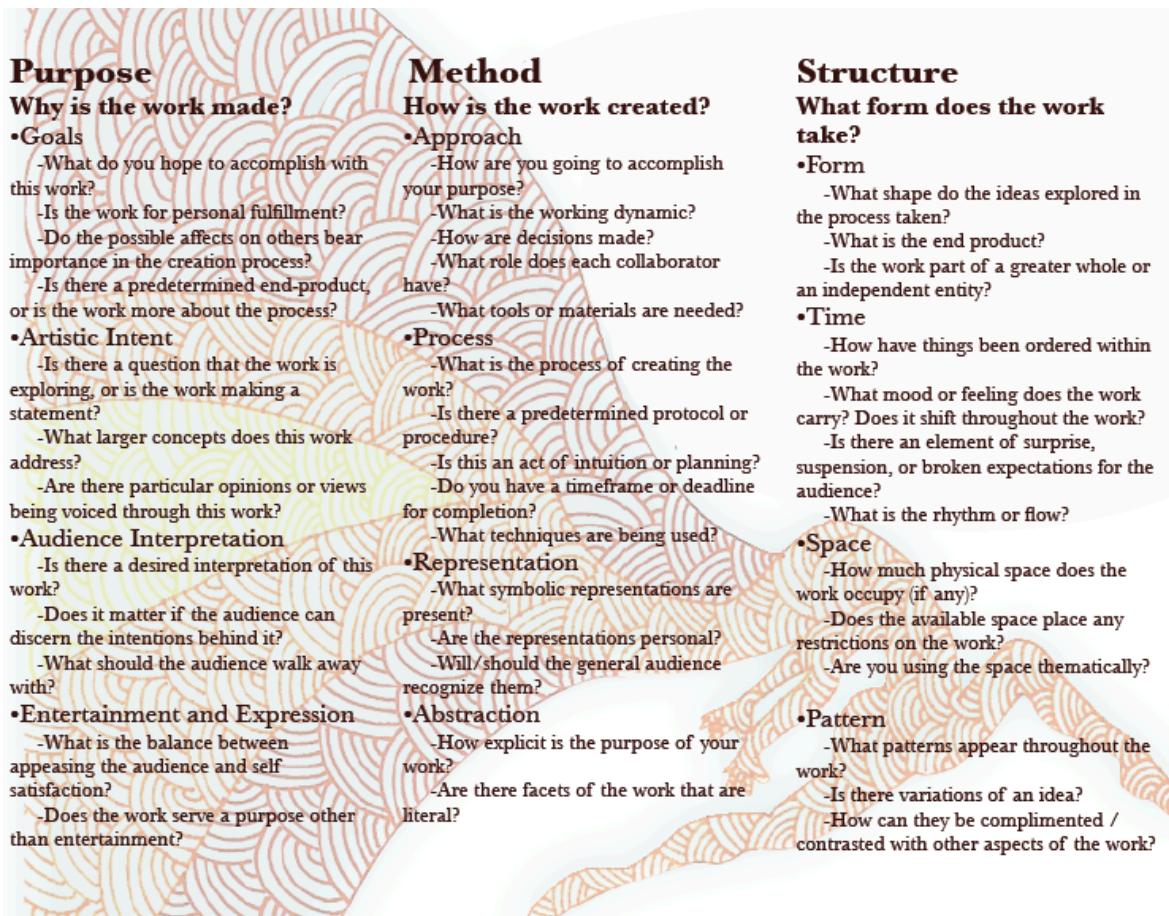
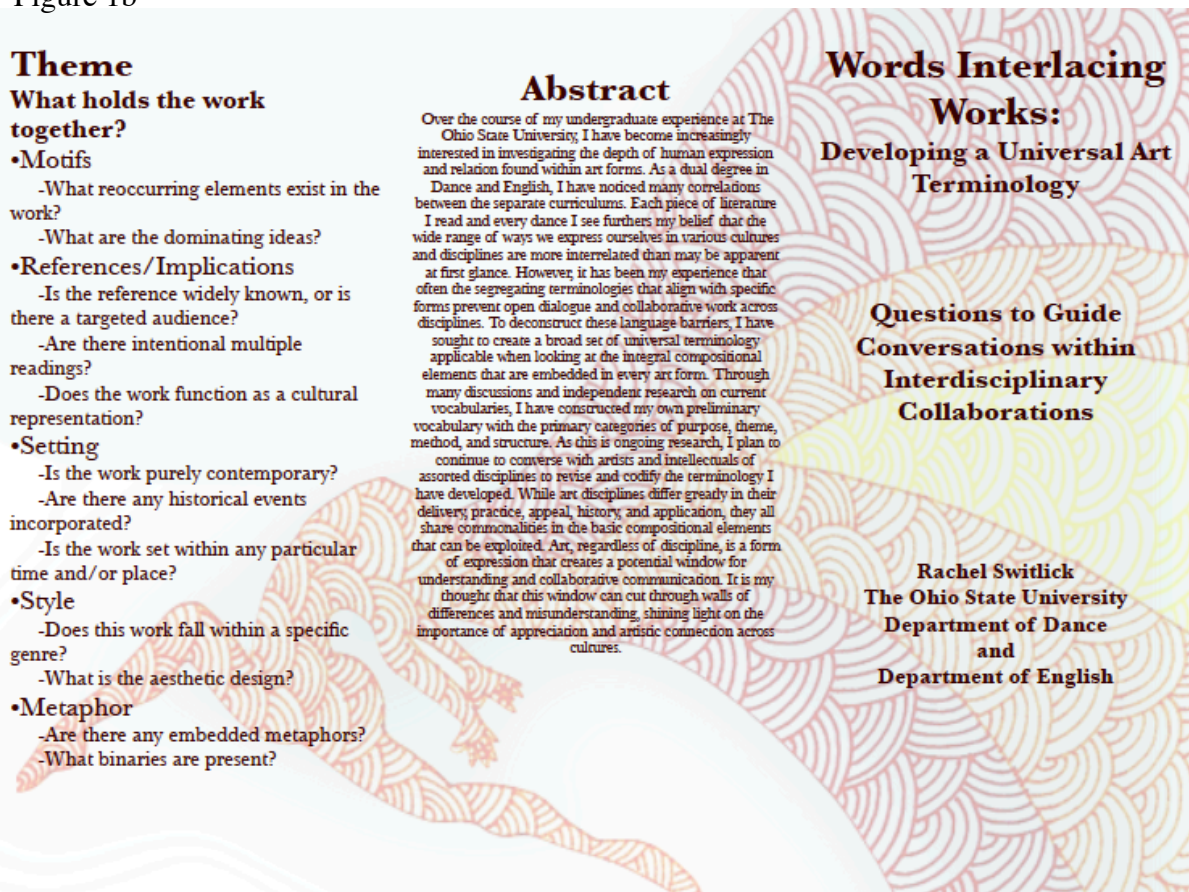


Figure 1b



Process

After securing collaborators for the project, I was essentially facilitating seven different collaborative projects that would become the performance pieces of *Polyphony*: “Afterwards,” “Not Listening,” “It’ll Be Fine,” “Not Important,” Everything Before I Asked and She Said Alright,” “Not Yet,” and “Structure.” With all of these different processes happening simultaneously, it was interesting to engage in the different crossings of disciplines. As things progressed, I found that the initial conversation had set the precedence of open dialogue. When problems or new ideas came to surface with any one aspect of the work, everyone seemed to have the understanding that those things needed to be voiced. Although the creation process was often segmented — for instance, the visual art pieces were manufactured separately from the development of the movement material that would be interacting with them — there was consistent consideration for the whole. Due to time, available materials, and other unforeseen limitations, some of the original ideas had to be modified. Thankfully, talking through these changes helped to alleviate the stress and kept things progressing.

While I found the working dynamic that we established incredibly beneficial, that is not to say that there were not some complications along the way. I was fascinated by the creative processes coming together, often with a beautiful discord. The disjunction that sometimes found its way into the process provided me the opportunity to put my compositional terminology to the test. While the difficulty of finding solutions ranged, going back to the terminology and the dialogue it fostered was consistently useful in keeping all collaborators cognizant of the factors at play.

During a rehearsal for the piece, “Not Important,” actor Sunny Yu-Lee had just gotten off-book and dancer Tori Alesi was trying to solidify her timing and spacing. After a few run

throughs, Tori was visibly frustrated. As we were going over notes, she voiced the difficulty she was having because Sunny was never in the same place from one run through to the next. Because of this, Tori felt she could not execute the choreography she was given properly. The change in Sunny's stage placement would cause Tori to have to redirect, often losing her train of thought. I had observed Tori work through the phrase material with dedicated practice, and likewise, I had heard Sunny speak her lines with a developed character and improving conviction. Despite the individual improvements, there was something halting the piece when the two equally committed performers tried to work together. As we kept going forward, I could feel tension and anxiety edging its way into the rehearsal. I soon realized that actors and dancers use two different methods for learning material: actors traditionally develop a sense of their character, learn the lines, and then get the blocking whereas dancers often memorize the steps and floor patterns and then layer on the details of performance quality. Although we had been rehearsing weekly together, we reached a point where our differing approaches had become an issue. Once I made that connection, I went back to my terminology to clarify the issue. Taking this pause allowed everyone to find understanding, and immediately I felt some of the uneasiness leave the room. We developed a new method for the piece that was somewhat of a middle ground between the two. Sunny set her blocking sooner, and Tori learned to spatially navigate. Up until this point, Sunny and Tori had been functioning separately, but after this talk, they began to function as a unit: making performative choices based off of the needs of each other.

When I received a version of the music for "Structure," I was surprised by the timbre. Evan Chapman, the composer, had incorporated all of the qualitative shifts we had discussed, but I found that the opening mood was much darker than I had anticipated. However, as I had no distinctive mood in mind for the beginning of the movement, I let the music take the

choreography this new direction. I discussed this thematic shift with the performers, and as we continued working, the music provided a stronger sense of narrative. Upon reflection, I realized that the process of sending Evan rehearsal footage to develop the music simultaneously allowed him to see something in the material that I had not. Our initial discussion let him know what was important to me as his collaborator, giving him room to explore things outside of that. I am grateful that the discussion had made space for this exchange as it made for a richer end product.

In the same piece, the category of Theme was again addressed in the collaboration between the design of the visual art objects and the choreography. When the visual artists were first introduced to the dancers, they heard the performers' desires to have a bar to swing under and over. They were given the following information on what had already been determined for the piece:

Purpose

- To create an abstract environment that shifts as the dance progresses
- To allow for collaboration between visual art, dance, and music

Method

- Create structures stable enough to take weight
 - The structures should have a unique aesthetic that seems new/foreign to the dancers' starting environment
 - Abstract playground
- Create phrase material for the dancers, and then have them solve the spatial problems that develop as the structures enter the space
- Music will be composed for the work, and performed live

Structure

- Structures will enter the space after the dancers have started
- Dancers will become more familiar and comfortable with their surroundings as the piece progresses
- The piece will end with all structures out and the dancers fully interacting with them, transitioning to the ending of the performance with all collaborators walking through the pathway on the floor.

Theme

- Environmental shift
- Playful, curious attitude of dancers: exploration, risk taking with weight
- Structures: "other worldly"

Taking this information and the desires of the dancers into account, Charlie and Kristen began developing their pieces. Part of the way through, they came to me with their own issue: as they developed the objects, a theme of volume emerged. The ramps, bench, and box were all objects

with definitive volume. The horizontal bar did not fit their thematic aesthetic. Having the compositional terminology structure, they were able to articulate this issue to me and talk about possible solutions. After several ideas — my favorite being an elaborate pulley system to suspend more horizontal bars — they decided that the boxes attached to the base of the bar tied it to the rest of the work enough. I was pleased that the compositional categories helped this conversation to happen, facilitating more clarity in the choices made in the work.

While these are only a few examples of the cross disciplinary complications, there were similar results in the other situations: compromises were found and the collaborative development enhanced the work.

Another part of the process of the culminating performance was the logistical matters that needed to be addressed to make the event a reality. Eric Mayer, the production manager for The OSU Department of Theatre, helped me secure the venue and offered me the support of a stage manager, Angela Cutrell. While this was a help, I only had a few brief meetings with Angela before tech week. Securing and storing set pieces, managing the budget, constructing rehearsal and production timelines, advertising, ticketing, and keeping everyone on schedule were some of the things on my to-do list concurrent with my own creative processing. While this did cause a fair amount of stress at times, I personally found myself assured by it. Whenever I ran into a creative block, I could temporarily shift my focus to these more concrete responsibilities. Because of this alternative avenue to the project, I was able to keep my energy going and remain constantly engaged with the work. There was an odd sense of security in the definitive aspects of planning and executing the event. Of course, this side of the project was not without its own set of issues. Mount Hall Studio Theatre was being used by a class, and the conditions in which we received the space were far away from performance ready. Finding a proper format for seat

reservations took some time. I had secured a small production crew, only to have them bow out because of conflicting commitments before we started. Fortunately, Daniel Diller and Asha Whitfield agreed to help instead.

Because of changes with another student that was going to show work, I had to do some re-budgeting about half way through the process. I met with an Associate Dean of Arts & Humanities to discuss reallocating some of the funding for the project. Thankfully, being an artist herself, Merijn Van Der Heijden was very encouraging of the work. (She even attended the performance.)

Despite the many logistical and creative hurdles, I loved living in this process. I could feel that the terminology I had spent so long researching was truly informing my approach and the work ethic that the artistic collaborators, performers, and crew established. Looking back through my journal of the process, I realized that there wasn't a day from September until the closing performance that I wasn't somehow engaged with the work. It bounces around from rehearsal notes to pragmatic thoughts to creative questions, very reflective of how I felt during that time.

There was a note I made in early January with little explanation: "Respect the people you work with, and trust comes easily." Now looking back, that idea was really what held the lengthy multifaceted process together. Everyone I selected to work with — faculty advisors through house ushers — are all individuals for which I have a great deal of respect. I hope that the care and formality with which I presented the projects communicated that high regard. With the positive energy that enveloped everyone at the performance, I felt I had produced something meaningful, something that each one of us involved could walk away from with a sense of pride and accomplishment. Because of how many different disciplines were involved, every

contributor was exposed to some sort of new artistic experience. It is incredibly fulfilling as an artist and facilitator to know that *Polyphony* was able to give something back to those who had given so much generous energy and thought to the work.

Results/Findings

The four main categories were well understood to those involved, despite the range of disciplines and techniques. Having participated in other less successful collaborative endeavors in the past, I truly believe that the supportive environment and ability to work in tandem with each other was caused by the clarity of the beginning conversations. While no one arbitrarily tossed out the vocabulary I had introduced, I found that having discussed the four categories allowed collaborators to establish a shared **purpose**, a **method** for how to work cohesively with the various creative processes, potential **themes** involved, and an idea of the **structure** the work would take. The format of this initial communication laid a foundation for the positive decorum that carried throughout the process and clarified the roles and expectations of every person involved. The words themselves were helpful in producing *Polyphony*, but I found greater value in the open dialogue they encouraged. I believe that the common ground shaped by these categories would aid in any collaborative artistic work.

After the performance run was over, I asked my collaborators to define the four categories “Purpose,” “Method,” “Theme,” and “Structure” as they saw them being applied to the collaborative process of *Polyphony*. I received responses from about half of my collaborators. In reviewing their definitions, it became clear that there was an understanding amongst them.

During the process, I found that my subcategories were not as beneficial for the collaborators as the four overarching categories. Because I was orchestrating the collaborative discussions for all of the pieces, the subcategories were more helpful for my knowledge and practice than the other collaborators. In mediating between disciplines, I would employ the language and found that it was understood without confusion.

The other collaborators seemed to use the four categories to fit their own verbiage into the process. The involved visual artists and performance artists approached the work from vastly different angles, but the categories allowed for discussion. For instance, the “structure” of a dance typically relies on a length of time and movement of a body through space while a visual art piece has the “structure” of a type of material, shape, and size. Although the components were not the same, we were able to support and understand each other through the commonality of having a structure and then from that commonality we could discuss the differing details.

Moving Forward

As I stated in the overview of this paper, I plan to employ the discoveries of this research in my future artistic endeavors. I expect to continue to develop the practice of using the terminology, solidifying a procedure for conducting the initial conversation that I find to be invaluable to my collaborations. I am considering publishing my work as an aid to other interdisciplinary artists. Boysenberry Image Factory’s performance video and “Behind the Scenes” interviews of the experience of *Polyphony* will serve as documentation of the interdisciplinary work involved in creating the show. The group is submitting the documentary to an online journal so that it will be accessible to others. We have also discussed releasing segments of the documentary online as a way to share the process with others.

While this research has only been implemented thus far in the creation process, I hope to turn it into a tool for general arts education. I feel that many individuals shut themselves out of the arts because they fear they lack the intellectual capability to enjoy or interpret it. However, in discussion with people having an artistic experience for the first time, their thoughts are some of the most insightful. I think that a distilled introduction to artistic composition, like my terminology, could allow the general public a brief education on art. This would provide people with some basic vocabulary to verbalize their thoughts. My hope is that by using simplistic words in my categorizations, some of the intimidation surrounding the imagined hierarchy of art could be dismantled to give more people the confidence to engage in the artistic community.

Having talked with me about my research, Francesca Spedalieri, OSU Department of Theatre PhD candidate, asked to use my terminology pamphlet in an elective theatre class she was teaching: "Self Images: America on Stage, 1830 to the Present." She explained that many of her students did not feel they had the background in theatre to write critically on the subject matter. As one of the pieces they were assigned was a devised theatre piece, she thought the broad terminology would benefit their writing. Upon their evaluation of the course, Francesca has promised to share with me any feedback she receives on my terminology. If it proves to have been useful, I plan to do a second version of the pamphlet geared towards viewers of artistic work. This way, people outside of the arts have an accessible way into an array of experiences.

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